

# UPDATE

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

## Inside

- VDES is moving - p. 2
- Virginia's LEPC's participate in survey - p. 3
- FEMA stresses education - p. 3

## Warehouse fire draws national attention

**I**t took one large fire to focus national media attention on rural Smyth County. When a warehouse near the town of Atkins caught fire during the early evening of August 20, the incident mushroomed into one of the largest hazardous materials emergencies Virginia has faced in recent years.

The warehouse served as a storage facility for the British-owned company of Marley Mouldings Incorporated. It contained over a million pounds of a granular substance made up of PVCs and polystyrene used to make various molding products, including specialized plastic items.

Emergency Services Coordinator Charlie Harrington was on site within 30 minutes after he was notified about the fire, along with the warehouse manager and the company's local vice president.

The county's plans, resources and staffing were thoroughly tested by the scope of the incident.

"What was interesting about this experience is that you can exercise regularly and you still don't know all the problems you may face until you're in the real thing," Harrington said. "There's no way you can visualize everything that will happen."

The response involved coordinating efforts from numerous groups, including VDES, the State Police, DEQ, Fire Programs, the EPA, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the state hazmat teams from the city of Bristol and the counties of Wise and Giles. Almost 200 volunteer firefighters from 11 departments in Smyth, Wythe and Washington counties helped battle the blaze.

The fire presented many issues and challenges for all the groups involved.

### The Decision to Evacuate

Because of the dangers presented by the plume of thick black smoke from the fire, which was drifting northeast toward Atkins and U.S. 11, the decision was made to evacuate about 500 county residents



from the surrounding communities. "You have to err on the side of caution to protect public safety," said Harrington. "At first, we didn't know what we were dealing with so we anticipated the worst and evacuated the area to be on the safe side."

Initially the media reported that the fire was releasing cyanide gas. Although PVC plastic does not emit cyanide gas when it burns, another type of plastic — ABS plastic — does. Air and ground samples, collected and tested by DEQ, helped identify the extent to which the burning PVC plastic threatened the local community.

"The initial evacuation was a good decision," said Jack Tolbert, the VDES Hazmat Officer who responded to the site. "As the incident progressed, we decided to keep people out mainly due to the dangers from smoke inhalation."

### The Media

"We've had small incidents where I've dealt with the local media," said Harrington. "But during this event, there

were five monster media trucks on scene, press people around the clock and, at one point, seven different television stations on site at the same time. CNN was flying over and the telephone calls were unbelievable." He quickly discovered he had the legal authority to close the airspace over the site, which he invoked, as did Petersburg after the 1993 tornado.

Although press briefings were conducted, they were not as frequent as Harrington realized they needed to be.

"When I have to do this again, I'll have a staging area for the press, keep them back from the site and make sure they're briefed on a regular basis," said Harrington. "I found out you've got to develop a rapport with the press very quickly. You've got to treat them like major players. If they can count on getting information from you on a regular basis, generally, they're not going to be a problem."

### The Command Structure

"We had exercised the Incident Command System (ICS) and ideally, you roll in and you designate," said Harrington. "In reality, you have to get in, size up what you've got, look at your resources, then implement the ICS. To get your full ICS going — it takes awhile."

Tolbert pointed out that getting organized initially was difficult because of the number of agencies and fire departments involved in the response. Both agreed that the regular briefings, held every hour, were invaluable in coordinating response efforts and keeping the players informed as the incident continued. In addition, the company provided full support to the responding agencies. "Their cooperation made it a whole lot easier to work this incident," said Tolbert.

*(continued on page 2)*

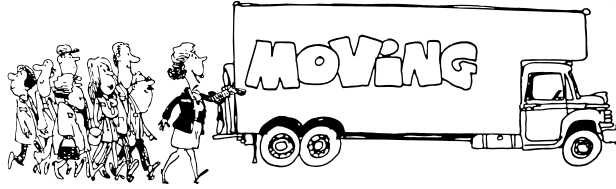
# VDES moving to new location

**A**fter 20 years at one site, an agency can outgrow a facility, particularly when the agency operates in a rapidly changing field such as emergency management. This month, VDES will be consolidating its warehouse and administrative services in a new building about five miles from its Turner Road location in Richmond.

"One of the problems we've faced has been maintaining good, solid staff coordination, both for special projects and on a day-to-day basis," said Assistant State Coordinator for Operations, George Foresman. "The opportunity to put everyone together under one roof will provide for greater cooperation, coordination and efficiency on the part of the agency."

Currently, VDES maintains a warehouse in one location and two office buildings at Turner Road, in addition to the EOC at the State Police Academy. The offices and the warehouse will be collocated together in the new building. Space will be shared with the Department of

Corrections Central Region Office, which will be on the first floor, while VDES will



occupy the second floor and a portion of the first.

A major improvement is that the new building will have a number of training rooms, enabling VDES to offer training programs on site rather than in locations around Richmond. "By offering all of our training at the agency offices, the people

who attend the classes can easily network with our program folks as well," said Foresman.

The Virginia Emergency Operations Center will remain located at the State Police Academy and its phone numbers will not change.

Agency head Addison E. Slayton, Jr., said, "This is an issue we've been working on for the last four or five years. More than many other state agencies, we are required to remain operational at all times. This move will enhance our ability to operate at a higher level and position us to function in an increasingly technological environment."

## Change of address and phone numbers

- ☐ The new agency address is 10501 Trade Court, Richmond, 23236.
- ☐ The main telephone numbers for the agency are 804/897-6500 (voice), 804/897-6506 (fax).
- ☐ These phone numbers will be

effective October 27. VDES employee e-mail addresses will not change.

- ☐ After-hour phone calls will continue to be forwarded to the state EOC communications center.

## "Warehouse Fire"

(continued from page 1)

### The Solution

The most challenging issue was how — or even whether — to put the fire out. Letting it burn was not an option because of differing factors, Tolbert said. Depending on wind shifts, the smoke from the fire posed a possible threat to spectators traveling on Interstate 81 to Bristol's race weekend — an event that attracts an average crowd of about 120,000 people. Industries in the path of the smoke had been shut down and were facing economic loss, and there was a real threat that parts of Interstate 81 would have to be closed. Norfolk and Southern Railway had stopped train traffic along the tracks close to the fire because of the smoke and were concerned that heat from the fire, which

was burning in excess of 2,000 degrees, might affect the tracks.

With approval from Marley company officials, a contract was arranged with a business in Pennsylvania which provided and transported 3,500 gallons of foam to extinguish the fire. The large volume of foam ensured that firefighters would have enough to completely extinguish the blaze.

"Once you've started putting the fire out, you've got to make sure it's out," said Tolbert. "If it's in the smoldering stage, more hazardous smoke and chemicals are released into the atmosphere and it could start burning again."

### Mobile Command Posts

The local Army Reserve Center offered their facilities for use as a staging site for both the VDES and Smyth

County Mobile Command Posts. "The command posts enabled us to have an area where we could bring our people together to keep them informed," said Harrington. "Our county communications system — the mobile command post and the 911 system — helped us make good use of our resources."

As with every large event, cell phones were jammed as media, private citizens and the on-site responders overloaded the system. In planning for future scenarios, Harrington is working to wire the command post for hard-line telephones that will provide alternate communications capabilities when cell phones are jammed.

### Lessons Learned and Some Advice

"In terms of hazardous materials, always expect the unexpected and be aware,"

said Tolbert. "Be on the lookout for situations that may become hazardous materials incidents. Even a common material, such as the PVC in this incident, can be a potential problem, particularly if it's present in large quantities."

Tolbert said, "Based on this incident, I'm working with the coordinators in my region to identify the businesses and industries that house and store these types of materials."

Harrington said, "As emergency managers, we need to constantly review what resources are available and where we can get them. Exercises are important and they need to be set up so that you **do** throw in the 'unforeseen' difficulties. Finally, make sure that you have a good command structure in place and that everyone understands it."

# HAZ MAT



## Survey takes pulse of Virginia's LEPCs

**I**n 1986, the "Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act" (EPCRA) was passed which mandated the formation of LEPCs. The passage of this regulation and others related to hazardous materials was driven to a large degree by the tragic disaster that occurred in Bhopal, India, in 1984. In that incident, over 4,000 people were killed after a toxic chemical was released from the nearby Union Carbide plant.

"In part, the LEPCs were established to provide a forum through which citizens could interact with industry and government," said VDES Chemical Emergency Preparedness Branch Manager, George Roarty.

He continued, "The legislation ensures that the public knows and understands the chemical hazards within their communities and that they know what to do in the event of a hazmat emergency. Within a community, the committees are one important repository for data on all hazardous chemicals that are subject to regulatory requirements."

This past year, Roarty designed and conducted a survey of Virginia's LEPCs. The response was excellent, with 71 of the 114 LEPCs participating. The results were:

- 90 percent of respondents indicated they had a plan that met the minimum SARA Title III planning requirements;
- 32 percent of the LEPCs

have updated their emergency plans within the past year and 14 percent are in the process of reviewing and updating them;

- 36 of the 71 LEPCs indicated their plan had been exercised within the past year;

- 23 percent said their membership list was not current or on file with the state which makes them vulnerable to potential liability issues;

- 58 percent indicated they advertised their meetings and 35 percent said they did not;

- 31 percent said they met with neighboring LEPCs to discuss regional issues and concerns;

- The majority of the LEPCs said they have procedures in place to process requests for information, while 62 percent responded they did not publish a public notice regarding availability and location of EPCRA information;

- 80 percent received three or less public inquiries during the past year;

- 31 percent noticed a drop in facility Tier 2 report submissions after the state stopped sending the forms last year;

- Six indicated they had federal facilities located in their jurisdictions that had not joined or formed an LEPC;

- While most said they did not have an operating budget, out of those who did, 24 percent said they received the majority of their funding from local government.

The LEPCs identified many priorities and issues in the survey including updating plans, providing training, exercising their plans, improving public education and awareness, developing a computer database and strengthening public/private sector coordination.

"This survey provides a very good profile of where

Virginia's LEPCs are today," said Roarty. "With this information, we can work to develop strategies for the future to support the LEPCs and the hazardous materials response community. If these committees are not active, the burden of hazardous materials response activities often falls to the local emergency services coordinators."

## FEMA stresses education

**A**s the emergency management field grows in complexity, education becomes more important. FEMA is working with colleges around the country to include emergency management-related courses in their curriculums — as certification, associate or full four-year degree programs.

The agency's Emergency Management Institute has assembled a list of colleges and universities offering emergency management courses. It includes descriptions of courses, programs and points of contact. In addition, EMI is developing an emergency management curriculum to serve as a guide for schools interested in beginning their own degree programs in this field.

As part of this thrust, the institute is working with colleges across the nation to assist them with developing an emergency management major. At this point, Virginia's University of Richmond is one of the few schools in the country that offers a bachelor's degree in the field.

For a list of schools that offer courses, programs and distance learning in emergency management, visit FEMA's web site at <http://www.fema.gov/emi/edu>. For more information about FEMA's Higher Education Project, call Wayne Blanchard at 301/447-1262, e-mail [wayne.blanchard@fema.gov](mailto:wayne.blanchard@fema.gov)

## Counties recognized for outreach programs

**S**tafford and Albemarle counties recently received both state and national recognition for two outstanding community outreach programs.

Albemarle County's "Senior Weatherbusters," an emergency disaster preparedness program geared to senior citizens, won an "Achievement Award for Program Excellence" from the National Association of Counties. The outreach campaign also swept up an "Award of Excellence" from the National Association of County Information Officers.

Stafford County's Emergency Response Citizen Assistance Team (ERCAT) was awarded an "Achievement Award for Program Excellence" from the National Association of Counties. The ERCAT program recruits and trains volunteers to staff public inquiry lines during disasters. ERCAT was a winner in the Virginia Municipal League's 1997 "Achievement Awards" competition as well.

# TRAINING



## Hazardous Weather and Flood Preparedness

October 28-30 (Region II)  
Location to be determined  
For information, call the VDES Training Office at 804/674-2458

## Technological Hazards Division

### EPCRA — Emergency Release Notification and Reporting Workshop

October 8  
Lebanon  
For information, call George Roarty at 804/674-2708

### Hazardous Materials Technician

October 13-24  
Ashland

### Advanced Hazardous Materials Control

November 10-14  
Martinsville  
For information, call the VDES Tech Haz Division at 804/674-2510

## Search and Rescue

### SAR Council

October 25  
Richmond

### GSAR Institute

November 14-16 (Part I)  
December 12-14 (Part II)  
Front Royal  
For information, call Winnie Pennington at 804/674-2422

## Conferences

### EPA Region III Chemical Emergency Preparedness & Prevention Conference

December 2-5  
Pittsburgh, Penn.  
For information, call Al Brown at 215/566-3302

### Virginia Emergency Management Conference

February 11-13, 1998  
Virginia Beach  
For information, call Chris Eudailey at 540/582-7095

## Sites of interest

For access to real-time weather data, including radar information, check out this site by American Weather Concepts.

At a cost between \$5-8 a month, the service offers a range of weather information, including NEXRAD/Doppler weather data. By subscribing to this service, you can access site-specific weather maps, extended forecasts, special weather statements, severe weather watches — which include hurricanes and thunderstorms — and other kinds of information.

The data are updated anywhere from about 15 minutes to three hours.

Go to: <http://www.weatherconcepts.com/>



## National Alert Broadcast

October 15  
2:00-3:30 p.m.

This month focuses on fire safety PSAs and features a video describing the high-speed Burn Center and Camp located in Tampa Bay, Florida. Regular features include the “FEMA Update” and “Superintendent’s Corner.” For more information, call 800/527-4893, 301/447-1068, e-mail: [sue.downin@fema.gov](mailto:sue.downin@fema.gov)

## Education opportunities

*The Medical College of Virginia Department of Preventive Medicine/Environmental Training Programs is sponsoring a one-day seminar relevant to the emergency services field:*

### Recognizing and Managing Liability for Environmental Affairs

December 3  
Richmond

This seminar surveys sources for potential liabilities such as common law, statutory, civil, criminal and contractual. You’ll gain an understanding of how these areas relate to one another in order to anticipate, plan and minimize these risks. The cost is \$50. For information, call Christine Coggins at 804/828-4548.

***The program offers courses in environmental training. One such is:***

### Certified Hazardous Materials Manager (CHMM) Review Course

December 15-19  
Richmond

This class is designed to assist individuals prepare for the CHMM exam which will be offered after the completion of this five-day course. The CHMM is a helpful credential to acquire if you are working in the field of hazardous materials management and transportation. To register for this \$675 course, call Christine Coggins at 804/828-4548. Discounts are available to state and local government on a case-by-case basis. For information regarding discounts, call Dr. Leonard Vance at the same number.



310 Turner Road  
Richmond, VA 23225-6491

UPDATE is a monthly publication of the Virginia Department of Emergency Services. Contributions of articles or ideas are welcome and can be made by calling 804/674-2499. State Coordinator...Addison E. Slayton  
Information Director...Michael J. La Civita  
Executive Editor...Janet L. Clements  
Managing Editor...Jo A. Hoots

Access the VDES homepage at:  
<http://www.state.va.us/~des/des.htm>